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The Concept of Melody. A Structural point of view

Anca PREDA[1]

Abstract: *Classical music is governed by rules that manage the relation between notes and the dynamic element that states its tempo and rhythm. Musical analysis represents the process of understanding the composer's aims when creating a work and can be used as an intermediary depiction of it for purposes like expressive performance or music comparison. Melody is one of the most elementary features of music, consisting in a series of notes stringed together. The melodic line of a musical work is a sequence of sounds that structure a melody. Melodic analysis regards the stylistic features of a musical phrase.*

Key-words: *melody, phrase, prolongation, rhythm, analysis*

1. Melody

At the first glance, melody seems an arbitrary string of notes and rhythmic values; however recent psychological studies have shown that the mind is constantly and involuntarily trying to make sense of the sensory data that it receives from our ears and eyes, by making connections, or relationships, between the incoming data and information that is already stored in memory. The mind tends to favour the easiest connections, which are usually also the shortest routes. In a polyphonic texture, the ear and mind tend to form melodic lines from notes that are close together in pitch. Leaping notes are more difficult to connect melodically, therefore the larger and more frequent the leaps, the more difficult or unintelligible a melody becomes.

[1] Transilvania University of Brașov, anca.preda@unitbv.ro

1.1. Melodic contour

The works from musical history – vast and diverse – have been influenced and chiselled by the characteristics inherent to the tonal system. Important, that from the point of view of musical analysis is the way in which the features of major and minor modes govern melodies. The differences between the meaning of certain notes found inside a melody (be it a motif, phrase, period, etc.) are big and if taking in consideration the direction of music, the differences that are part of "the grammar of notes" (principal note, secondary/dependent, harmonic, non-harmonic, etc,) are not enough for a complete analysis (Salzer 1962, 13).

An example from Beethoven's *Bagatelle op. 119, no. 11*, (Salzer 1962, 41), illustrates a connection between D, E flat and F that is realized instinctively, connection that follows an ascending line – these notes being the components of the main melody. The quavers C, B flat and the crotchet C are mere ornaments (diminutions, prolongations) of the melodic line. The melody follows a descending line from F to D and is organized in a more complex manner. In the three measures of the fragment that follows, the melodic line has an ascending and descending movement spanning a third, in which one can identify the prolongations that derive from the notes that make up the melody. So in order to decide the direction of the music, one must take into consideration the difference between the notes of the melody that represent the direction and the ones that prolong or elaborate this structure.

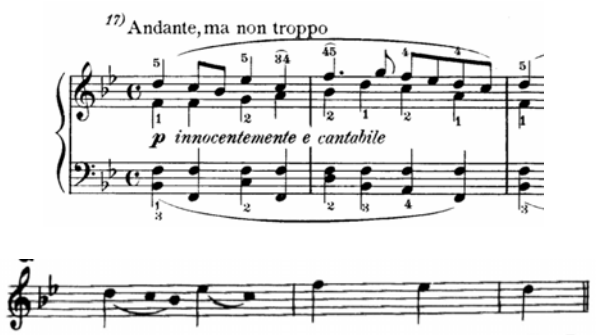

Fig. 1. *Beethoven, "Bagatelle op. 119, no. 11"*

Another example, also by Felix Salzer which is a fragment from Schumann's *Album für die Jugend*, (Salzer 1962, 41) is fitting in reiterating the idea presented earlier: a clear ascending or descending movement of the melodic line is not necessarily an indicator of the direction of the main structure. So the ascension to A1 does not indicate the direction of the structure (it just is a neighbour note of G1), a closer look revealing a series of ascending movements (spanning a third), in which the first two crotchets of each series having the role of auftakt and at the same time being prolongations that precede the structural notes. In the third measure, the prolongation follows the note in the main structure (D), resulting in the appearance of two structural notes (E and D) inside one measure, which creates a higher level of intensity of the motion. The fundamental descent becomes easily noticeable, taking in consideration these previous remarks.

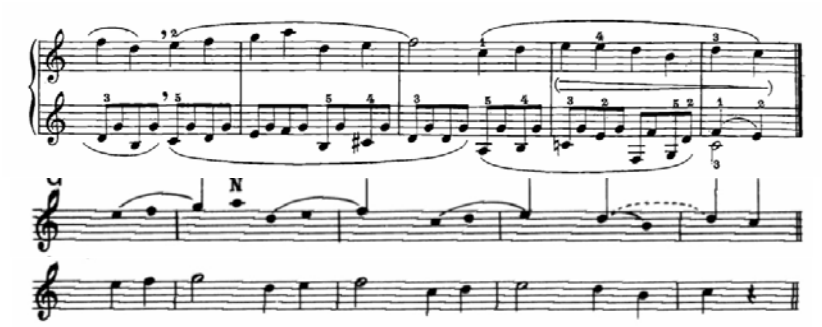

Fig. 2. *Schumann, "Album für die Jugend"*

The rhythmic and melodic prolongations add colour to the music, but its value and character becomes clear only if related to the melodic structure, that performers take into account.

In order to refer to the interdependency of melody and chords, a fragment from Bach Chorale no.7 has been chosen, where the melody stretches in the first two measures, on an interval of fifth A – E (E being a prolongation of the A) continuing its ascent to C sharp in a step by step motion. From a harmonic point of view the A major chord dominates the fragment, all the other chords subordinate. The chords have here a structural function, almost like pivots. They are the pillars that determine the flow of the music. By creating movements and making connections, prolongations are born and as a result, chords with different

meanings or functions in the musical discourse. One can conclude that even at this level, the same as in the melody, there are structural chords (that determine the direction of the movement) and chords of prolongation (passing or ornamental).

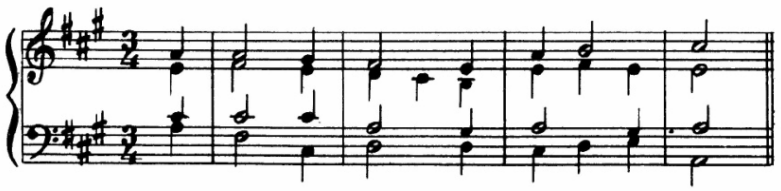

Fig. 3. *Bach, "Chorale no. 7"*

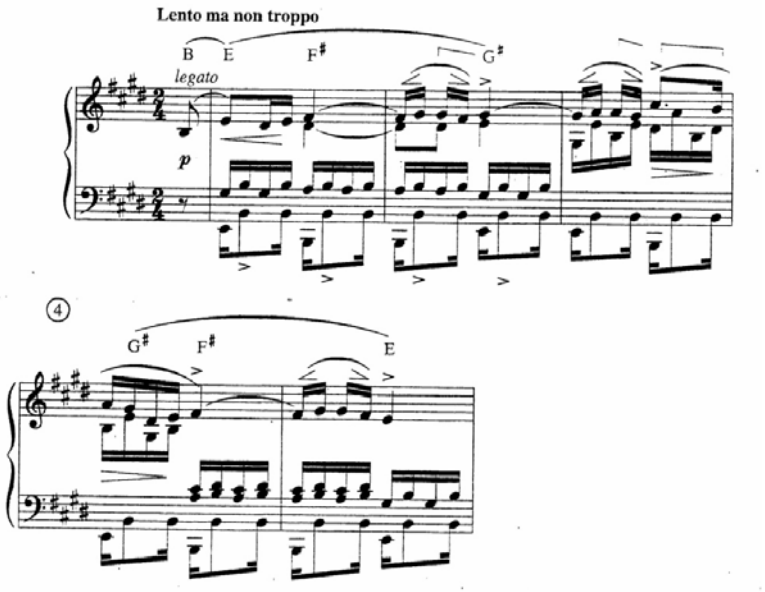

Fig. 4. *Chopin, "Etude op. 10 no. 3"*

The opening five measures from Chopin's *Etude op. 10, no. 3* are a more complex example (Cadwallader and Gagné 1998, 18) in which continuity and variety are combined, the tonic triad being thus exploited. Beginning with an *auftakt*, the melody goes through E towards G, returning to E. The ascending step by step motion is interrupted by the leap to C sharp and followed by a descending movement (at a structural level of the melody) towards the final of the fifth measure. Even from the beginning, one can notice the fact that the neighbour notes enrich the main melody, the harmonic notes being clearly differenced by the non-harmonic ones.

2. Melodic chords

The melodic chords have the role of creating chordal and contrapuntal support to the melody, without playing a role in voice leading or contributing to the direction of the musical phrase.

2.1. Passing chords

The passing chord or the series of passing chords represents one of the most important techniques that derive from the combination of harmonic and contrapuntal concepts. This gave a significant development to the idea that passing chords are derived from the principles of counterpoint. The recognition of chords found in harmonic progressions and the coherence that is found inside them, between the chords that have a structural function makes possible their separation to the ones with passing or ornamental function.

2.1. The neighbor note chord

The neighbor note chord represents the most important contrapuntal factor. The neighbor note can be an ornament both for the fundamental of a chord or for its third or fifth. Therefore using superior or inferior neighbor notes, the chords resulted could be in their root position, in first or all the other inversions and could even be seventh chord or diminished seventh chords (in all inversions). The neighbor note chords can also be obtained if the bass is sustained, thus a pedal point being formed, or if ornamentation appears at the inner voices.

There are cases in which one (or two) of the outer voices of a chord has a neighbor note and the others are followed by passing notes. In such cases a *neighbor passing chord* is resulted that doesn't contain exclusively the characteristics of a passing chord, nor of a neighbor note chord, but combines them. Therefore, it can only be catalogued as a fusion of the two chords (passing and neighbor).

Just like the passing chord, the neighbor note chord has the role of prolongation. While the first type has the role of passage from one structural chord to the next, the second has the role of ornamental motion around a chord. All these chords represent techniques of prolongation, whose significance has a major importance in the development of music.

2.2. Chord prolongation

The origin of chord prolongation lies in counterpoint this being based on the principle that certain notes replace other notes that dominate the entire group of notes. In counterpoint a note can receive a certain expressive character from the notes that surrounds it or through melodic ornamentation (Larson 1997, 107). In multiple voice counterpoint, the birth of new chords (resulted from the ornamentation of one voice) does not reduce the effect of the initial, main chord. This could be the basic concept in the formulation of a definition of technique through which a chord's structural importance can be prolonged through other chords.

To sum up, the prolongation of a chord means its expansion through one or more chords. The structural importance of a chord can be prolonged (expanded) through other chords, hence, a chord governs a contrapuntal progression formed from other chords that subordinate to it. The prolongation chords can appear as a result of movement around a chord, case in which the notes of the outer voices are neighbor or close the notes of the main structural chord, or as a result of a movement inside a chord, when one or both outer voices fill the motion of the chord towards notes of the main structural chord. Both can appear with the support of a pedal point. The passing or neighbor note chords represent chords of contrapuntal prolongation.

It is very important to make the distinction between the concepts specific to harmony and those specific to counterpoint both in analysis and in interpretation. The contrapuntal chords that make the prolongation are subordinated to the

harmonic progressions that create the structure, these being able to either enhance or enrich voice leading and fill the spaces found between the harmonic chords or to prolong a harmonic chord. Therefore, the contrapuntal chords are found both in the direct motion (the passing chords) as well as in the indirect one (the chords that prolong a sole harmonic chord, thus suggesting a delay effect).

2.3. Melodic-Contrapuntal prolongations

According to Salzer, both melodic structures and prolongations can be expressed in three ways: as a continuous line that ties two distinct notes – the intervallic filling type, as a motion that surrounds a note – the ornamentation type or an intervallic delimitation type, which is used only in prolongation purpose (Salzer 1962, 119).

Although based mainly on the neighbor note, the ornamental motion sums all types of figuration around a note. One must underline the fact that the same types of motion appear at different structural levels of a melody.

3. Conclusions

The structural and ornamental chords form together with the melody a whole of the musical phrase, at a micro and macro organizational level (where distances between the points of structure are large and the prolongations are at greater scale).

The removal of ornamental figuration and the discovery of the principal line create new connections, which alter the natural phrasing. Musical understanding of a melody has, as its basic require, the knowledge of the main direction, the structure in order to determine the characteristics of the prolongations, the structural notes being the spine of the melody. On the other hand, different types of prolongation offer the character, rhythm, and colour of the melody, which in turn allow the correct reading of the basic structure.

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